The Knoll at Middlebury College | 2025 Annual Report

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draft 12/16/2025, final 5/8/2025 | Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT USA

All photos courtesy of Megan Brakeley unless otherwise stated

The mission of the Knoll is to explore food as a medium to cultivate well being in people, place, and the planet. We root our work in celebrating connection and dismantling oppression.

2025 was a year of abrupt transition: a slow, wet start to the season gave way to statewide drought conditions and outdoor burn bans. Water was not the only scarce resource; nationwide scarcity thinking, fear, and political division echoed to campus with staffing reductions, reorganization of critical institutional justice-oriented work, and a bend toward efficiency over relationality. The growing season proved challenging moving from one extreme to the next: drought was punctuated by an early frost; even crops that would typically flourish in a dry fall (dry beans, winter squash, tomatoes) took an early hit and failed to thrive. However, twenty-three years of dedicated soil building enabled the Knoll to weather most of this variability and uncertainty better than most. While we have poured time and care into the soils and programming at the Knoll, the deep deficit of physical infrastructure for worker, guest, and food safety is exacerbated by extreme weather and prevents us, and Middlebury College as a whole, from meeting our goals[1]. And yet, the rich interdisciplinary opportunities and critical thinking partners who weave our community together provide hope and amazing hands-on educational opportunities for students in our programs and the community at large.

Our **team of 16 Interns** are the beating heart and guiding hands of the Knoll. Special thanks to Hayley Fenton ’26, Aisha Thapaliya ’25.5, Sam Surks ’25.5, Charlotte Xu ’26.5, Caitlin Sheen ’26.5 for their ongoing, multi-year commitments to shaping the Knoll, becoming peer leaders, and ensuring knowledge transfer.

← Knoll Spring/Fall Interns facilitate Garden Volunteer Hours and support events during the academic year

L-R: Sanai Bastian ’28, Kayden Lemee ’26, Matt Stevenson ’27.5, Sheila Camacho ’25, and Abi Alfaro ’25.5

Our Summer Interns → stewarded all Knoll work during their 15-week internship, and most continued in Fall ’25. L-R: Gabrielle Anchondo ’27, Jade Zarate ’28, Josue Solis ’26, and Tatenda Mapungwana ‘28

Special thanks to Sheila Camacho and Changchang Ma, who served as our Knoll Events Interns, coordinating our team and the use of the space for many diverse groups on campus. Given that we receive dozens more requests for supported use of the campfire pit and pizza oven that we can manage, this year we added to our Event Support Form a question inviting groups to reflect on how their work aligns with our mission so that together, we can make choices that embody our institutional goals and values around diversity, equity, and inclusion.

[1] At the time of this writing in early May, 2026, we are delighted to mention that promising developments lie ahead in the future as the Pavilion Project advances. We are immensely grateful for this!

<u>2025 Major Research and Academic Projects</u> this year included Architectural Studies' HARC 741 and 742: Community Design Studio Thesis with eight students, Izzy Pentony '26 (Biology) thesis research, and independent research by Caitlin Sheen (ECSC) '26.5 on soils analysis and TROMINO instrument experimentation to map bedrock at the Knoll.

Biology major **<u>Izzy Pentony '26 worked with Professor Erik Solhaug's lab</u>** during summer, and wrote:

"My summer research project investigated the nectar chemical ecology of squash plants and how nectar influences pollination. Squash plants are a great study system for nectar research because they produce large flowers that have a lot of nectar, making it easy to collect from them. I grew three different cultivars of the squash species *Cucurbita pepo*, so a lot of my research was also focused on comparing the nectar composition and pollinator visitation between the three different cultivars. To do this, I used cameras to record what pollinators visit the plants, when they visit, and how many visit. I collected nectar from the flowers of all the plants and determined differences in nectar volume and composition between the different cultivars as well as between the same plants during high pollinator visitation vs low pollinator visitation. I have continued this research during the school year and am currently developing it into a senior biology thesis. I had so much fun growing my plants out at the Knoll this summer – it was great to spend so much time outside and to get to know the space better!"

<u>Former Knoll intern, Caitlin Sheen '26.5</u> shared in a blog post her independent research questions:

"This J-term was fast-paced and lovely, and I am finally taking the time to slow down and write some reflections. As an Earth and Climate Sciences major and former Spring/Fall Knoll intern, the Knoll feels like an incredibly important connection between my academic passions, the earth, and the Middlebury community. Though I am no longer an active intern, I still seek out ways to support this special place. In between knitting projects and learning to classic ski this past month, I took some time to pursue threads that Megan and I had discussed last fall (2024).

The smaller project required some basic QGIS analysis of the Vermont Geodata NRCS soils dataset. Our questions: what percent of Vermont soil cover is Nellis? What percent is Addison County? Nellis loam is what allows the Knoll to thrive. If you look at a soil cover map, you would see a small pocket of Nellis surrounded by a sea of clays. Defined by slopes and well-drained, these soils were originally glacial deposits and now support agriculture. Using QGIS and R, I was able to make some quick calculations: **Nellis is 2.6% of the soils found in Addison County and a mere 0.75% of all Vermont soil cover,** consistent with findings from John Griggs' 1971 survey. These findings make the Knoll all the more precious; it cannot exist just anywhere.[2]"

"A larger project is in the works as well. Sitting in the ECSC 705 group thesis presentations, their figures jogged something in my memory. One group was analyzing depth-to-bedrock profiles, something that I distantly remembered having discussed with Megan at some point**. Excited, I reached out to Professor Jeff Munroe to inquire. He was incredibly helpful and lent me the TROMINO, an instrument that utilizes seismic waves and certain benchmark understandings of the underlying bedrock and calibration points. I ventured out

[2] *NeB, Nellis stony loam with slopes of 3-8%, on which the Knoll is sited, is designated as "Prime" agricultural value and with a ranking of #1 (of 12) in the VT Agricultural Value Group. This soil is incredibly special and undergirds everything that happens here!*

to the Knoll on a cold, windy day to see if it would work for this project. I spent about an hour and a half running back and forth from the TROMINO (it gives you 15 seconds to run away or your footsteps will show up in the data). After taking 6 profiles at two spots where we knew the depth-to-bedrock reasonably well, I brought the instrument back to the lab and we took a look at the output. Overall, this seems to be a viable instrument to conduct surveying at this site and eventually construct a 3D map of bedrock depth. The next steps are carefully collecting data and documenting methods so a future intern can take this on.

I am so grateful to have the Knoll as a resource to apply my learnings from my ECSC degree. Projects like these ground me in my studies by connecting Earth science to my community here."

It has been a joy working with the **HARC 741 and 742 Senior Thesis Community Design Studio** students as their "client" for this hands-on work this year, spanning Fall '25 through Spring '26.

Class member **Owen Johnson '26** recapped the fall semester:

"This fall '25 eight students and I worked with Middlebury Architect and Professor Sam Ostrow to design a new pavilion for the Knoll. The goal was to research, plan, and begin the architectural design for a new pavilion that would improve quality of life and work at the Knoll.

<- Photo credit: Owen Johnson

We started our semester with frequent visits to the Knoll and participation in garden volunteering shifts which made the need for this pavilion immediately apparent.

The current bathroom situation is one porta potty and a seasonally-available portable handwashing station, and the wash and pack system is a hose and a Rubbermaid stock tank that must be set-up and taken down for each use. There is very little shade and zero protection from the elements. We sought to design a pavilion that could accommodate a wash and pack station, bathrooms, and a gathering space with shade and protection for workers and visitors.

We spent a lot of the fall semester deciding where this building should be located and after many conversations with Knoll staff (present and former), interns, and alumni, settled on a site directly north of the pizza oven and south of the fire pit.

We thought this location would best elevate the existing experience at the Knoll. It will foster a connection with the pizza oven and provide accessible and sheltered gathering space for those events.

Furthermore, its proximity to the original Knoll tool shed and garden beds will streamline the wash and pack process and improve the Knoll's food production capabilities.

Going into the spring semester, the group will start refining our design and hopefully end the spring semester with a solid start on the construction drawings for this pavilion!"

With generous support through the O'Neal Family Endowment, we were able to bring in the voices of **Knoll and Architectural Design alumni** as a group of consultants to provide perspective, ask questions, and serve as a resource for the group. Special thanks to Aria Bowden '23, Tanya Chen '24, Sheila Camacho 25, Cassia Park '24.5, and Aisha Thapaliya '25.5 for meeting with the group 4+ times for iterative studio feedback.

The **Fall Environmental Studies 112: The Science of Environmental Systems** course continued with its field trial comparing two varieties of carrots and two different bed treatment areas (standard tillage and regenerative no-till beds) with 40 students in the four sections of this lab-based Environmental Studies core course. In this drought year, the differences in soil moisture were readily apparent!

Biology **Professor Greg Pask's Entomology Class** came to the Knoll to conduct field walks, gather data for iNaturalist, and researched, designed, and installed informational signage about species interactions at the Knoll to help educate passers by. The Knoll is a significant destination for species observation and diversity with hundreds of observations over several years

Other 2025 Program Highlights and Notes

To honor the life and the untimely, tragic loss of Will O'Neal (class of 2020 and Knoll Intern 2017) and with generous support from his family and community, we **established the William R. H. O'Neal '20 Memorial Endowment for the Knoll** with a $100,000 gift. This enables longer-term sustainability for the Knoll, support for student internships, and equity efforts to enable full participation for all Knoll participants. We were also humbled to receive a generous gift from Norris Ou '17. These gifts are vital to the Knoll's sustainability in our day-to-day operations, as well as for our longer-term planning and essential infrastructure updates and improvements. We are immensely grateful and honored to steward the Knoll's growth forward to meet the needs of our current moments and to bring our work into alignment with current production requirements. We are indebted to our colleagues in Advancement who see to the Knoll's continuing viability.

As in past years, our one-acre garden on a three-acre site hosts over **115 varieties of perennial species**, and we grew over **200 varieties of 50 different vegetable crops** and 24 different flower crops for Midd Dining, HOPE Food Shelf, the Nulhegan Food Security Project, Weybridge House, and other campus partners.

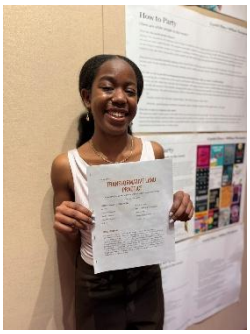
Made possible with vital support from Sustainability and Environmental Affairs, we were able to continue to **replace dated infrastructure.** Last year we were able to replace the failed (original to 2003) well pump and take on replacing the hoophouse endwalls, doors, and (plastic) skin. This year required replacement of our well cap and to hire Spafford and Sons to install a pitless adapter to address multiple failures of bacteriological tests to clear the well for drinking water. We are grateful that the combination of the new well pump plus the pitless adapter should support another 20 years of safely accessing our artesian water supply.

This year also saw **multiple staffing changes and departmental reorganization**, including the retirement of Dean of Sustainability and Environmental Affairs Jack Byrne in August, the retirement of Food Studies Academic Director Molly Anderson in August, and the parental leave of SEA colleague Tara Federoff in December. We are grateful for Jack's support of the Knoll through the years and were delighted to come together to celebrate his leadership on campus-wide sustainability integration for a pizza celebration at the Knoll. Professor Anderson's dedication to the Food Studies minor, core courses in Agroecology, Food, Power, and Justice, and Introduction to Food Studies were transformational learning opportunities for so many through the years. At the time of this writing, the Food Studies minor will no longer accept new declarations and is being phased out following Spring '26 due to lack of faculty. Jack's retirement was a part of a larger voluntary retirement/staffing reduction that saw 53 staff depart with over 1,200 years of cumulative service to Middlebury College. In December of 2025, with the aforementioned staffing transitions, as well as last year's departure of the Sustainability and Environmental Affairs Program Director, Megan took on advising support for Weybridge House and nascent efforts to convene cross-campus partners around next directions for Food Studies. In the late fall we welcomed President Ian Baucom's official inauguration as the 18th president of Middlebury College.

By the Seasons: WINTER

Winter is an essential time for program assessment and development, data collating, reporting, research on infrastructure and best practices, convening Knoll partners, inventorying and organizing relationships and expendables, cleaning, repair and maintenance work, budgeting, planning, purchasing, conference attending, hiring, intern leadership development (and maybe even some rest).

The Knoll was invited to participate as part of a successful **$20k grant for Mary Hogan Elementary from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets for Farm to School Capacity Building.** The steering committee includes principal Jen Kravitz, Farm to School lead and Kindergarten teacher Dana Bibb, Food Service Director Steve Marinelli, and MHS parent and Knoll assoc. director Megan Brakeley. Focused on capacity building, the grant provided funds for Mary Hogan to replace spent wooden garden bed frames, access technical assistance from Shelburne Farms and state-wide resources, and receive and finish carpentry on the new Garden Shed designed and hewn by **Will Gusakov's HARC 1035: Forest to Frame course**. Originally, the opportunity to receive the frame was directed at the Knoll; however, we did not have a pressing need for a small structure. Through collaboration with the steering committee team and with generous support from Goosewing Timberworks, the History of Art and Architecture department and Addison Central School District, we were able to land the frame at Mary Hogan. This was a remarkable integration and alignment across our institution and community: with VT Agency of Ag support and in Will Gusakov's capable hands, our students were able to design and craft a timber framed garden shed with timbers hewn from trees harvested from College lands for the benefit of our local elementary school.



As part of their BLST 399: Community-Engaged Work in Black Studies seminar, Senior Hayley Fenton '26 designed a syllabus as part of their project entitled ***Anti-racist Land Practice: Acknowledging Land as a Facilitator for Transformative Social Change***. Hayley's community work plan was designed for the Knoll based on their experience as an intern since Summer 2023. Megan served as adviser and Hayley folded the plan into our 2025 Garden Volunteer Hours programming as weekly Knoll Reading Hours. Hayley saw the project through completely, facilitating each of 15 the sessions throughout our entire season. Reading Hours garnered consistent attendance, multigenerational learning space, and purposeful time to ground our work and build community in critical scholarship; authors included Kanafani, Allen-Paisant, Yunkaporta, Dunbar-Ortiz, Dunn and Neumann, White, Bowens, Benjamin, Garth and Reese, and Liu, among others.

With generous support from Sustainability and Environmental Affairs, we were able to co-host a workshop, **Winter Movement Practice,** and welcome back Mellon Fellow and former Professor Maree ReMalia. Some twenty students, faculty, and staff gathered in Mitchell Green Lounge to join in community.

In Winter Movement Practice we move together and engage in prompted writing through practices that support warming, feeling, resting, and reflecting. We have opportunities to notice internal impulses and aspirations, while being in the company of others. Knowing we are living through a time that often requires us to be outwardly engaged and activated, this practice is structured with seasonal shifts of the more than human world into phases of darkness and dormancy in mind, with reverence for how these phases can support connection with ourselves and each other as we move through the fullness of our lives.

Interns Aisha Thapaliya ’25.5 and Samantha Surks ’25.5 worked alongside Megan January – February to conduct our **2025 Intern Hiring Process.** The hiring process reflects on the Knoll’s work to articulate and refine organizational practices of: identifying fundamental skills, dispositions, and behaviors for success, reviewing and assessing different roles, reflecting on alignment between our stated objectives and values with actual day-to-day tasks and climate, and collectively stewarding the evolution of the program. This provides a concrete, nuanced, and specific container for reflection on three key Knoll Intern aspects: facilitation, leadership, and working as a member of a team. We discern between growth and fixed mindsets, honing skill in providing feedback (and creating an environment in which feedback can be received), and framing distinct roles through a politic of non-disposability, where no one task is or role is inherently “better” but is discrete and may require distinct experiences, awareness, and practice.

RISE & RETURN
MARCH 30th, 2025
1:00 - 6:30pm
A gathering for the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) Community of Vermont to sow connection, reap joy, and gather communal knowledge.
WITH GENEROUS SUPPORT FROM
REGISTER:
GO/RISEANDRETURN/

SPRING

This was a cold, wet, long-held spring that hearkened back to memories of “normal” springs in Vermont when June was typically cool and damp. While it was too wet for early forage harvests for animal feed and bedding, the fruit trees and shrubs of the Knoll thrived on having a long, deep, consistent soak to recharge.

Borne from convening at the 2024 VT Sustainable Jobs Fund Annual Farm to Plate Gathering and shared recognition of the state-wide absence of BIPOC-led land and ag sector events, a committee of representatives from UVM, Liberation Ecosystem, and the Knoll convened a new gathering. The event was led by Drs. Amaya M Carrasco-Torrontegui and Carlos Andres Gallegos-Riofrio, UVM PhD candidates Alexis Yamashita and CJ Sands, and Samantha Langevin, Kiya Vega-Hutchens Midd ’13.5, and Megan. With generous support from the Vermont Community Foundation, King Arthur Flour, NOFA-VT, the UVM Institute for Agroecology, the Anderson Freeman Center, PALANA, Tea Club, and the Climate Action Fellowship, the Knoll and Liberation Ecosystem co-hosted **Rise and Return: A Gathering for the BIPOC community of Vermont** to sow connection, reap joy, and gather communal knowledge. This was the first event of its kind in the state.

The event was held at the Mahaney Center for the Arts on campus and featured workshops from UVM faculty, community leaders, and campus partners on topics like seed saving, pruning fruit trees and shrubs, strategies and tools for rapid response community organizing, tea tasting, an expanded listening practice, felted art, and artistic indicators of planetary heath. The day-long celebration was opened with **keynote remarks by artist in residence Dr. Carolyn Finney** and we celebrated with a meal provided by Mexico in Vermont catering. Middlebury students, alumni, community members, and experts from around the state gathered to share in community. Special thanks to Cassia Park ’24.5 and Charlotte Xu ’26.5 for their artistic and design contributions, Idanesi Ojior ’27 for providing incredible tea service, to Sheila Camacho ’25 for introductory remarks for Dr. Finney; to HaQuyen Pham, Migrant Justice, Abolition in Action, José Rivera, Alexis, Carlos Andres and Amaya, and Megan for providing workshops and to Samantha as our MC.

In April, we were honored to help welcome to the Knoll Middlebury College honorary degree recipients **Emily Welty and Matthew Breay Bolton during a 3-day mini-residency** organized by Conflict Transformation and the Climate Action Program. Emily reflected, "it's not an exaggeration to say that the Knoll and the enlivened soul work you are facilitating there has been a part of our conversations nearly daily since our time with you all."

Knoll interns **Sheila Camacho '25 and Abi Alfaro '25.5 attended the Planet Forward Summit** in Washington D.C. through Sustainability and Environmental Affairs.

Knoll Intern **Sam Medina '25** led a peer **Oratory Now Coaching session** for Knoll Interns to develop their public speaking and presentation skills as facilitators for our programs.

We hosted a garden walk and Knoll visit with the **Addison Central Program** and **NOM** to harvest produce from the garden. NOM and ACP took produce directly from the garden back to the Center for Community Engagement's kitchen on Blinn Lane to cook a meal together.

Knoll intern and Climate Action Fellow Lili Platt '25 organized a **campus talk, gardening session, and one-to-one peer career advising with Middlebury NYC Posse alum Miki Nakano '20 (Yale School of the Environment '26 with a focus on food justice).** Miki spent the day with our team and mentoring volunteers thanks to generous support from the Climate Action Program. To close the day, we were grateful to be able to attend an AAPI Cuisine Connection dinner hosted by the Anderson Freeman Center. We were able to take a potluck dish made with culturally relevant produce grown at the Knoll to share with the groups.

During the May 3rd **Green Up Day Garden Celebration at Mary Hogan Elementary School,** the Knoll tabled and offered a make-and-take seedling starting activity, shared information about visiting and getting involved with the Knoll, and partnered with Middlebury College student organization NOM (Nutrition Outreach and Mentoring) to share Harvest of the Month grain granola balls.

During the Green Up Day Garden Celebration, the January Term course raise the frame at Mary Hogan Elementary School. The Forest to Frame class pushed through heavy rain to raise the frame in good spirits in true liberal arts fashion with a poetic dedication and celebratory "topping off" of an evergreen bough.

← Installation day in May… So soggy!

← and the class meeting in January

Special thanks to the Architectural Studies and History of Art and Architecture Programs for their ongoing support and extra funding of this project

Thanks to the VT Agency of Ag Farm to School Capacity Building Grant and carpenters John and Jordan Martin, we were able to finish out the frame with floor, cladding, custom-built door, and polycarb roof and outfit the shed with workbench, tool hangers and organization/storage systems in April 2026 →

As in the past, we constructed a germination chamber outside of Hillcrest to care for our Early Spring seedlings. The insulating insect netting that we use required mending this year, and in the spirit of "use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without" we brought in Knoll Friends Nancy Parsons, Emma Barrett '24.5, and Material Engineer Kelley Hickey to guide volunteers through a **farm fabric mending workshop.** Under this well-loved and artfully patched veil, our tiny seedling starts could thrive. Because we do not have electricity at the Knoll, or supplemental heating in the hoophouse, this germinating happens on campus.

Garden Volunteer Hours merrily continue the good work in their 23rd year. Highlights this year included:

We helped plant, water, harvest, and care for **2 Raised Garden beds**, originally funded with generous support from the **Disability Resource Center at the Prism Center for Queer and Trans Life.** Herbs and tea plants from the garden were harvested, dried, garbled, and packaged for a Prism Center gathering to celebrate September as Recovery Month in partnership with the Turning Point Center of Addison County and Health and Wellness Education.

The **Biology department** and was poised to host **NatureFest** at the Knoll organized by Knoll Intern Sam Medina '25 and Professor Alexis Mychajliw, Greg Pask, and other members of the Biology Department but were unfortunately unable to proceed due to weather. In the fickle spring weather, if we had had a pavilion or covered area in which to convene, we would have all been there with bells on.

Megan was honored with **the SGA Rodney and Beverly DeGray Staff Appreciation Award** in May of 2025, which she humbly received with acknowledgment for an incredible multigenerational network of support and font for inspiration. All the Knoll is, we are!

SUMMER

Reunion continues to be a staple feature; new summer interns welcome back alumni and connect across the generations of gardeners. This year we were honored to host a memorial and gathering for Will O'Neal '20 with some of his family and classmates to honor Will's life, plant sunflower seeds in his memory, and celebrate the endowment his family created for the Knoll. For the second year, we also hosted a 1.5 hour

demonstration and hands-**on workshop featuring Michaela Stickney '84's scything expertise** (see more later in summer).

We were delighted to meet and garden together, for the second year in a row, with the **summer Admissions Fellows** to help share in some hands-on experiences at the Knoll.

For the second year of partnership, we hosted **Liberation Ecosystem for an Outdoor Cooking workshop** featuring the wood-fired oven.

We welcomed back **Professor Shelby Kimmel to practice 풍물 pungmul drumming with our crew**, rooted in Korean agricultural working traditions and appreciation and connection to natural systems.

In June, as a continued part of the **Farm to School Grant**, we hosted **Mary Hogan Elementary teachers** for a potluck and garden tour to provide a social outing for teachers at the end of their schoolyear. Teachers toured the site, collaborated on with their colleagues, and drew inspiration for the Mary Hogan grounds.

Campus Farmers Collaborations: In our third year of partnership, we hosted the **UVM AX (Agroecology Extension) Fellows** and faculty to the Knoll for a day-long visit. Working from the foundational definition of Agroecology as "a science, a movement, and a practice" rooted in Wezel et. al's scholarship, the Knoll represented the "movement" pillar. Following a morning of conversation and garden work, we shared lunch and Megan hosted a **panel conversation on building movements in agriculture featuring staff from the Knoll, Liberation Ecosystem, and the Migrant Justice Milk with Dignity Standards Council**. We also spent a day at the **St. Michael's College Farm** to exchange farmwork, conversation, and enjoy one of their Salad Days events in our third year coming together for cross-campus community-building, learning, and program sharing. Due to inclement weather, we had to postpone our scheduled trip to the UVM Horticulture, Research, and Education Center, but look forward to continuing this again next year.

Summer provides opportunities for our intern team to meet with and learn from colleagues in the **Disability Resource Center and the Office for Institutional Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**. Deirdre Kelly joined us in the garden for conversation about the history of the ADA movement and to introduce frameworks of disability justice and recent student movements on campus. **Assistant Vice President for Equity & Inclusion**, Kristin Hocker, facilitated a workshop in the garden entitled **"Rest is Soul Care."**

We were grateful to welcome colleagues from the **Korean Language School** to tour the Knoll and visit with and harvest Korean crops gochu peppers, kkaennip/perilla, tong ho ssukgat chrysanthemum greens, and more. We understand that the foods harvested were used with cooking demonstrations and shared amongst the school—a full circle experience across Middlebury's offerings.

The **School of Abenaki** spent a program day at the Knoll learning about and applying green and white ash bark to the longhouse. White ash was collected and stored in collaboration with the college's facilities staff and Megan as the campus continues to monitor for Emerald Ash Borer and cut preemptively in order to make the most of this climate-impacted infestation.

We love hosting eight **Weekly Summer Work Parties hosting the Sustainability and Environmental Affairs Summer Cohort** to join together in shared work, community building, and see what kind of incredible cross-pollination comes up in conversation across the garden beds.

In a pilot year of collaborating with UVM Graduate Food Systems PhD candidate Alexis Yamashita, we grew several varieties of mung and adzuki beans as part of a forthcoming **Participatory Plant Breeding Project**, in an effort to support culturally meaningful seed breeding in collaboration with Burlington-area and UVM partners.

We were honored to welcome back Michaela Stickney '84 and community member Anthony Parent, and College Archives staff Danielle Rougeaux to share their generous knowledge of the **art and science of hand mowing** for a workshop during **Reunion**

2025. In this and two other visits, they covered topics such as peening, mowing technique, crafting hand-made hay rakes, custom snaths, and more. Under their skilled instruction (and finely honed blades) we were thrilled to bring home multiple trophies from the **Annual Hand Mowing Competition at Addison County Farm and Field Days** in August. (L-R: Michaela, Judge and Competition Commissioner/extraordinaire, Hazel Brakeley (1st, youth division), Megan Brakeley (2nd, Women), Tony Parent (1st, Senior Men and 3rd, Open), Danielle Rougeaux (1st, Senior Women), and Tanya Chen '24 (3rd, Women), Tatenda Mapungwana '28 (Knoll appointed Most Improved)

For the third year, we joined forces with **HOPE** (local nonprofit and the largest food shelf in Addison County, Helping Overcome Poverty's Effects) to **build a regular gleaning schedule** in the summer to combine on-farm learning opportunities with meaningful community-led effort. In collaboration with HOPE's gleaning coordinator, the crew harvested **blueberries in Ripton**, cucumbers at **Firefly Fields in Bristol**, and potatoes at **Little Village Acres** in East Middlebury to meet a variety of contributors at different scales who support HOPE's 35,000-lb gleaning efforts. Volunteers, including Cornwall Elementary's third grade class helped us harvest squash and count them in Spanish in a beautiful confluence of partnerships.

The summer crew also organized field trips to **Bound Brook Farm,** which utilizes Japanese systems for rice production, **Understory Farm,** regional leaders and exemplars **Soul Fire Farm,** and day-long **Shelburne Farms field trip**. We met with educators Vera Simon Nobes and Jed Norris, and toured the farm and sugarworks with Market Garden staff and former Knoll Intern, Claire Contreras '23, as well as SF Educational Intern and former Knoll Intern Aisha Thapaliya '25.5.

We celebrated peak August with our friends on the **Facilities grounds crews**, who help tend the Knoll and the miles of campus pathways to get there for our fourth annual pizza lunch and visit.

FALL

In spite of the prolonged 2025 spring rains and cool, wet conditions, the fall was marked by a **period of prolonged drought**. Documented by the State of Vermont's Agency of Agriculture in their 2025 drought survey, it had **an estimated impact of $15.5M in income loss for farmers across the state**. 86% of farmers surveyed described this year's drought as worse than other droughts, including 60% who identified this as the "worst ever seen." This was paired with a relatively early (September 20) first frost. Across the state and at the Knoll, lower crop yields, loss of crops, and the compounded effects of other major weather events (2023 late May frosts and severe rain/flooding, 2024 January windstorm, etc.) took their toll on our production.

Yet, diversified organic production, robust cover cropping, and prioritizing soil health, organic matter, and living covers remind us that good farming is climate-smart farming. Drought conditions yielded a bumper crop of gochu hot peppers and shell beans, as well as successful conditions for field drying them down, though the sting of the early frost interrupted their yield potential. Drought is incompatible with fungal growth; we enjoyed remarkably low/no levels of powdery mildew on our cucurbits and downy mildew on basils. Tomatoes saw low stress from typical fungal disease. In spite of the drought, the deeply-rooted fruit trees thrived on the early season consistent soil moisture and demonstrated tremendous annual growth. We saw the heaviest drought impacts on carrots and kale (heat stress amplifying flea beetle populations and secondary infections). The garden was largely buffered from drought impacts by decades of soil health building through green manures, compost amendments, and low- or no-tillage practices, though as with dipping into any reserve under stress, we expect to feel impacts later or in other forms. At the Knoll, the one night of early frost impacted our yield more than the drought, terminating ripening periods for staple crops like butternut squash, drying beans, and sweet potatoes.

During the early arrival period, we welcomed back 10 members of the **Middlebury Football team** for their annual afternoon of conversation and community service at the Knoll (among other sites, including Porter Hospital's Libby trail and area farms to help glean for HOPE).

Fall Orientation continues to be a staple feature of the Knoll. Summer interns punctuate their deep investment in the Knoll and in our team's work by welcoming incoming students and inviting them into the bounty and meaning-making of the garden. As we welcome new community members from every corner of our country and around the globe, we sprinkle in natural history of the area to help situate and greet newcomers. We were honored to help send off Kathy Doyle, longtime director of International Student and Scholar Services, as she embarked on her retirement and welcome 100+ **International and Transfer students for a "Garden Party"** afternoon of taste tests, gardening, and flower harvesting. We continued our tradition of welcoming the **First@Midd First Generation first-year group** for gardening, pizza, flower harvesting, lawn games, and a centerpiece social event for us all. This year we were also happy to meet the group of **fall orientation leaders** to share about the Knoll's work and to walk out to the garden together to encourage groups' use of the Knoll and to educate them about our community safety expectations as vital peer leaders.

As part of the College's fall orientation events, we participated in a Family Resource Fair, a community fair; served as host site for a first-year yoga class, and hosted an orientation "Trip" to the Knoll for 40 first years from the International and First-gen orientation pathways to the Knoll for a 2.5hour long garden volunteering session. Inclement weather and a lack of suitable cover brought us to Hillcrest instead to clean and process previously harvested food over wonderful conversation and sharing.

Harvesting during Fall Orientation: flowers, perilla, basils; cleaning garlic for donation and seed; shelling and grading beans for donation to the Nulhegan Food Security Project

KNOLCI (Knoll x Dolci) a delightful (semiannual) collaboration led by the Dolci board, including several current and former Knoll Interns. Thanks to summer coordination by Kayden Lemee ‘26, crop and menu planning, coordinated harvests, and beautiful time shared together, Dolci created a gorgeous 100 seat meal in Atwater Dining Hall featuring perilla and other herbs, elderberry, kale, beets, spinach and flowers from the Knoll, rounded out with other local foods purchased through the ACORN Food Hub. So many Knoll interns, volunteers, and friends made this beautiful collaboration possible, and the details were impeccable, from hand-drawn menus to hundreds of crowd-sourced reasons people love the Knoll, printed and enclosed at each place setting. Read the lovely *Middlebury Campus* article here.

The third annual **Mid Autumn Harvest Festival (中秋节 in Chinese, お月見 in Japanese, 추석 in Korean, and Tết Trung Thu in Vietnamese)** brought together the International Student Organization, Korean Student Association, Japanese Club, Vietnamese Students’ Association, West Asian and North African Students Association, Radical Asians, PALANA House (Pan-African, Latinx, Asian, Native American), the Anderson Freeman Center, the Bobolinks, Stuck in the Middle, the Chinese and Japanese Departments, and local organization, Addison County BIPOC+ with **over 740 attendees** during Fall Family Weekend. Special thanks to Changchang Ma ’26, without whom the whole event would not have happened; and for the Climate Action Fellowship, fellows, and staff for support like shuttle driving, “Festival Passport” zine folding, funding, parking support, greeting, and attendance tracking. This annual event is remarkable and takes months of planning; while a **major seasonal and ancestral holiday** in most of East Asia, there are only a handful of large gatherings on the Eastern Seaboard and to our awareness, none others in Vermont. The event was made even more special with the incredible artistic stylings of Changchang in every aspect of its production.

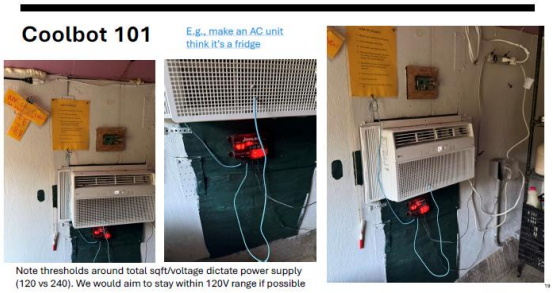
Lotka Paper-making and Sun Printing with Aisha
Fostering Inclusive Recreational Experience (FIRE)
Migrant Justice or Mold
3RD MID-AUTUMN HARVEST FESTIVAL AT THE KNOLL
2025
More on the Festival
More about the Knoll
Thank you!
Workshop: Korean Drumming with Green Mountain Samulnori

We had brilliant **Blog and Instagram storytelling** facilitated by intern Josue Solis ’26 and Changchang Ma ’26 and fun **Instagram posts** to help bring others into our Knoll learning journeys and community thanks to Gabrielle Anchondo ‘27 in summer, and Sanai Bastian ’28 and Changchang Ma ’26 during the fall with sprinklings from Megan.

We continue to partner with the **Cornwall Elementary 3rd grade for their 4x/fall weekly Garden Days,** this year working with Cornwall teacher Claire Benjamin ‘05. Cornwall third graders help sow cover crops, harvest, taste test, thresh and sort beans, and more. Interns Matt Stevenson ’28.5 and Changchang Ma ’26 met the group each week. Cornwall students were also met by students in Professor **Tracy Weston’s Environmental Education course**, which held class weekly at the Knoll as a living laboratory.

With heavy hearts, campus mourned the disappearance, and later, the **death of classmate Lia Smith ’26**. When Lia was found near the Knoll in late October, we cried. We made decisions to continue holding space to gather via Garden Volunteer Hours, and to offer options to meet in Hillcrest. Megan reflected on this process in a Knoll blog post from October 27, 2026; when the time came to sow garlic seeds for the next year, a small multigenerational core of volunteers first gathered in silence, made land-based offerings and shared readings and reflection before turning to the season to come.

This coincided with a **scheduled Reunion trip for Megan to the Yale Farm** and the Yale School of the Environment in New Haven, CT. As part of the trip, she met with Yale Farm staff and friends to learn about their strategy and document the farm’s wash and pack facilities. Megan documented site features and infrastructure in a slideshow, which she shared back with Knoll interns and presented to the HARC 741 course. Coincidentally, a group from MIT had been planning a similar visit to Yale Farm to learn about precedents; Yale Farm staff shared the slideshow with them, as well. Megan returned home with a twelve-foot long garland of marigolds strung by friends of the **Yale Farm and Yale Sustainable Food Program** from their home soil during their annual Fall Feast closing event in honor of Lia and the connection of her loss to their own experiences. We hung the garland on the garden shed, tiny orange globes drawn together and chosen with care, each a protest to the violence of erasure and a testament to vital beauty, solidarity, and remembrance.


Coolbot 101
E.g., make an AC unit think it’s a fridge
Note thresholds around total sqft/voltage dictate power supply (120 vs 240). We would aim to stay within 120V range if possible

Our **Fourth Annual (Friendly) Hot Sauce Competition** celebrated a fiery closing to the season with Knoll (고추) gochu peppers. We had over 18 entries to savor and were delighted to receive support from the Climate Action Fellowship to sponsor CAF Fellow Addie Shandro ‘26 to make hand-designed, -thrown, and -painted pottery dishes as gifts of appreciation for contributors. We are immensely grateful to all who joined to savor the preservation of flavors, summer, and life in the garden this past year. With hearts and bellies full, we gather in both loss and celebration at the Knoll, in community.

We continued growing **cempasuchíl marigolds for Día de los Muertos Celebration**

Some relics are good; others need to be updated!

Keep the scythes

← Office as barn is not ideal

This was our old well cap that continued to fail and has been replaced! →

The Knoll in 2026 by the Numbers:

250 volunteers aged 8 through 78 brought their willing hands and hearts to garden with us

185 students in **7** classes attended class at least once at the Knoll

2,200+ people attended **157 programmed events** ranging from classes or a campfire held at the Knoll to garden volunteer hours

15+ Class meetings were held at the Knoll

- EDST 430: Senior Seminar in Ed Studies (Weston) weekly (Spring '25)
- ENVS 112: The Science of Environmental Systems – 4 sections, Spring '25
- ENVS 112: The Science of Environmental Systems – 4 sections of Carrot Experiment Lab Fall '25
- ABEN 2104: Abenaki Language School - Summer '25
- EDST 0206: Environmental Education – recurring, Fall '25
- BIOL 204: Entomology – Fall '25

13 Planned events were canceled due to inclement weather and lack of appropriate shelter

80 unique opportunities to volunteer in the garden

1,690 hours of worked by **4** summer interns in summer

10 varieties of adzuki and mung beans grown as a pilot partnership for a Participatory Plant Breeding Research trial with UVM Colleagues

$10k leveraged from grants and partnerships to co-host the statewide Rise and Return: a BIPOC Spring Equinox Gathering

14 unique campus student organizations and departments coordinated by Changchang Ma '26 to host **740+** people at our **Third annual** Mid-Autumn Harvest Festival

2 campfires and **10** times we fired up the Wood-fired Oven in the Outdoor Kitchen for **50** hours of deliciousness * Note this was fewer than in years past due to the drought

26 participants in Michaela Stickney '84's Hand Mowing demonstrations during Reunion '25 sharing the ancient graceful art of using a scythe

28 field trips to neighboring farms and farm events + speakers brought to campus

800 pounds of produce we grew and donated to HOPE (winter squash, garlic, chard, carrots, mixed veggies, green beans, kale, tomatoes, and more). HOPE directly distributes and also redistributes to the following sites: Parent Child Center, Mary Johnson Children's Center, Open Door Clinic, New Community Project, New Haven Community Library, Otter Creek Child Care, Platt Memorial Library, Salisbury Free Public Library, SASH Program at Armory Lane, Vergennes Food Shelf

Gratitude

- To everyone who has held on to some of the Knoll's soil through its myriad phase, physical, chemical, and metaphysical changes, past, present and future – as eaters, revelers, wheelbarrow pushers, pruners, broadfork wielders, sign installers, portapotty sweepers, event coordinators, facilitators, prospective students, passers-by, and more: thank you. Thank you for the care you bring in so many forms. Places like the Knoll do not exist by accident, and we have all made something beautiful and wonderful out there. Knoll interns bring so much life, creativity, persistent questioning, exploration, and joy to our community effort. As the injustices and horrors and difficulties of commercial farming amidst climate change rack our brilliant farmer neighbors, our food system, and our pocketbooks, the joyful resistance at the Knoll keeps us grounded and buoyed to continue this important work

- The family, friends, and community of Will O'Neal '20, our hearts and hands are honored to tend the soil that holds Will's laughter and love. We are grateful for the outpouring of generosity to the Knoll in his memory, and it is an honor and privilege to help keep hold some of his memories at the Knoll
- To the Ou family for their generous support of the Knoll, and to our partners in College Advancement for their work to connect us all
- The Knoll benefits hugely from being part of the Sustainability and Environmental Affairs team (Jack Byrne, Janet Wiseman, Minna Brown, Tara Federoff, and Reilly Isler '25) at the Franklin Environmental Center at Hillcrest. Special thanks to Janet Wiseman for tirelessly reconciling all the Knoll's financial expenditures, invoices, and purchasing while also supporting our student employment; the Knoll program would reduce significantly in capacity if our limited staff time had to stay plugged into Oracle. To Minna Brown and the Climate Action Program for invaluable financial and mentoring support for shared student endeavors and opportunities
- John Derick and Jay Leshinsky continue to provide reliable insight, technical advice and know-how, and on-the-ground updates and hands in the soil and eyes on our infrastructure as they have since the beginning. Story keepers like John and Jay hold the meaningfulness of what happens at the Garden and function as our mycelial network that not only help us feel intergenerationally connected beyond our immediate campus community, but also enable rapid response to urgent needs like a failed well pump in April or a washed out driveway after a flood
- To Jen Kravitz, Dana Bibb, Deb Martin, Courtney Mulcahey, Jed Norris, and the VT Agency of Agriculture for their support of the Farm to School Capacity Building Grant. To grant partners ACORN, the Middlebury Natural Foods Coop, NOM, Shannon McClain in the Center for Community Engagement, and everyone involved in organizing and writing letters of support and seeing this grant through
- To Liberation Ecosystem, the Land Access and Opportunity Board, and the network of BIPOC-led organizations and colleagues guiding transformational change and keeping us connected
- To our friends in Facilities, Public Safety, Events Management, for the team effort to keep the Knoll as open and accessible to all
- To the faculty who bring their classes out to the Knoll as Living Laboratory for campus
- To the family and friends of Lia Morrison, whose hearts we hold
- To the many alumni, far and wide, and the friends, family, and loved ones you hold dear and bring with you to the Knoll: thank you for all that you continue to share with the Knoll
- To all of our community partners, without whom our work would stagnate in isolation and just be a sweet little campus project: THANK YOU. We hope that by staying connected, the reciprocal flow of energy, hands, love, and fresh takes can continue to nourish this place that we hold so dear

Recommendations

- Additional professional staffing support (additional student wages and the creation of a Knoll Assistant Director role) would enable deeper academic connections and better integration across campus. With only one professional staff responsible for such a wide array of responsibilities and tasks[3] often rooted in the physical grounds, weather, safety, there is undue time-sensitive, often urgent burdens that fall to them that greatly limit collaboration. It is incredible what we are able to collectively support and make possible, but it's not sustainable[4] and we'd love to be able to act on deeper institutional priorities
    - Top priority areas that would be addressed with additional professional staffing:
        - Strategic integration with faculty for better academic connection (e.g., annual Fall Welcome New Faculty cohorts pizza making at the Knoll; potential collaboration

[3] Please see the Knoll GANTT Chart that provides an overview of actual tasks; this provides insight into existing responsibilities

[4] December 2025 closed a three-year commitment for Megan as a Middlebury College appointee to the Porter Medical Center Board of Directors which included committee responsibilities for the UVM Health Network Strategic Planning Committee. Megan is eager to support other College-wide initiatives, but capacity is limited at this time

with Engaged Listening Project and the Partner Inclusion Program) – and the actual capacity to follow up on relationship building, research, and curricular support
        - Infrastructure improvements and planning with Facilities for improvements around physical accessibility, worker safety, and food safety
        - Furtherance of the College's stated commitments at the Knoll around the Land Acknowledgement
        - Furtherance of the College's commitments to Climate Action around sustainable food purchasing, and Food System Resilience anticipating disaster mitigation[5]
- Additional wages to support increased student staffing
    - Top priority areas that would be addressed with additional student staffing:
        - Winter Hiring Committee Process: since 2021, Knoll Interns are trained to lead the hiring process for our incoming teams; this is vital to our student leadership development model
        - Increased student leadership: The garden is mostly powered by volunteer effort. If our mission is to empower students to hold the Knoll regardless of their prior farming experience (which is just one highly teachable aspect of their responsibilities), then there are understandable lag times in terms of students' abilities to run key garden work times. By being able to retain former trained interns into a tiered system of responsibilities and roles, we would deeply empower and enable student development in alignment with the Knoll and the College's equity goals. All good work takes time, and we have built strong systems and durable relationships that students feel empowered to stay in, and take real leadership. We seek to honor this deep peer leadership and facilitation by giving students additional responsibilities and decision-making
- Infrastructure improvement: specifically, a large three-season shelter that provides for reliable shade and shelter from inclement weather to meet the diverse needs of the varied populations, accessibility considerations, and program functions. This would include solar electricity, restrooms, and a wash/pack station to provide reliable potable water
    - This would also ease pressure on colleagues and campus groups to devise full alternate sets of plans for events at the Knoll in inclement weather
    - This would help us meet critical safety protocols for wash and pack to ensure food safety
- Parking Area with safer public access to the Knoll and the Trail Around Middlebury
- Lands and Strategic Planning connecting the Knoll holistically to Middlebury College. The Knoll is an anchor for the identity of Middlebury College, yet there is a lack of alignment with how it is resourced and what its real potential could be
    - We are grateful that, as Roger and Patty Scholten retired and closed their 30 year lease on the surrounding farmland, by which the Knoll is surrounded on all sides (and bisected by the Trail Around Middlebury), the college has ensured that the land will stay in Organic Certification as it has been since 2007
    - We are eager to maintain strong working relationships with the incoming lessees of the College-owned farmlands knowing that we share audiences/users, borders, right of ways, and air- and watersheds and we recognizethe deep value in neighborly connection[6]

A note from Megan Brakeley '06, associate director of the Knoll:

We are immensely humbled by staffing cuts on campus, the horrors of our national (and global) politic, the degradation of human dignity, and the threats to democracy and academic freedom. At the same time, we are so proud to flourish in creativity, celebration, and exploration in service of the budding edges of systemic transformation and growing leaders who will transform the future for the better. The Knoll can hold space for this all, and I am so deeply grateful for the opportunity to be part.

[5] The VT Farm to Plate Food Security Roadmap to 2035 provides a useful framework: https://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/resources/vermont-food-security-roadmap-2035

[6] See "A Time to Talk" by Robert Frost: https://poets.org/poem/time-talk